

# Transitivity Harmony in the Rawang Language of Northern Myanmar<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Among the Tibeto-Burman languages the importance of the marking of transitivity varies greatly, from transitivity not being a very useful concept at all to being extremely important to the understanding of the morphology of the language. In this paper an example of the latter type is discussed, the Rawang language of northern Myanmar (Burma). In this language all verbs are clearly distinguished (even in citation) in terms of transitivity by their morphology, and there are a number of different affixes for increasing or decreasing valency. A very interesting phenomenon related to the importance of transitivity differences that occurs in Rawang is the phenomenon of what I call “transitivity harmony”. All auxiliary verbs in this language are transitive, and when they appear with a transitive main verb, they simply follow that verb and the two verbs together take one set of transitive-marking morphology. If instead the main verb is intransitive, then the auxiliary verb must be made intransitive by the reflexive/middle voice suffix to harmonize with the intransitive verb. This pattern holds even when the main verb is overtly nominalized. Aside from establishing transitivity harmony as a typological phenomenon, this paper will also discuss some of the motivations for such a pattern of marking and its significance for understanding event profiling.

## 1. Introduction

Rawang (Rvwang [rə'wàŋ]) is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by people who live in the far north of Kachin State in Myanmar (Burma), particularly along the Mae Hka (‘Nmai Hka) and Maeli Hka (Mali Hka) river valleys; population unknown, although Ethnologue gives 100,000. In the past they had been called ‘Nung’, or (mistakenly) ‘Hkanung’, and are considered to be a sub-group of the Kachin by the Myanmar government. They are closely related to people on the other side of the Chinese border in Yunnan classified as either Dulong or Nu (see LaPolla (2001, 2003) on the Dulong language and Sun (1988), and Sun & Liu (2005) on the Anong language). In this paper, I will be discussing a particular morphological phenomenon found in Rawang, using data of the Mvtwang (Mvt River) dialect of Rawang, which is considered the most central of those dialects in Myanmar and so has become something of a standard for writing and inter-group communication<sup>2</sup>.

Rawang is verb-final, agglutinative, and with both head marking and dependent marking. There are no syntactic pivots in Rawang for constituent order or cross-clause coreference or other constructions that I have found. The order of noun phrases is decided by pragmatic principles. Among the Tibeto-Burman languages the importance of the marking of transitivity varies greatly, from transitivity not being a very useful concept at all (e.g. Lahu; Matisoff, 1976:413) to being extremely important to the understanding of the morphology of the language. Rawang is of the latter type: all verbs are clearly distinguished (even in citation) in terms of transitivity by their morphology, and there are a number of different affixes for increasing or decreasing valency (see LaPolla (2000) on valency-changing derivations). One manifestation of the importance of transitivity in the language is the

phenomenon discussed in this paper, what I call ‘transitivity harmony’, where a transitive auxiliary verb must match the main verb in terms of transitivity. But let us first introduce the verb types and their marking.

## 2. Verb types and transitivity

Verbs can take hierarchical person marking, aspect marking, directional marking (which also marks aspect in some cases), and tense marking. The different classes of verb each take morphology in citation that can be used to identify that class (the citation form for verbs is the third person non-past affirmative/declarative form).

- Intransitives take the non-past affirmative/declarative particle (*ē*) alone in the non-past (e.g. *ngōē* ‘to cry’, *àng ngōē* ‘He’s crying’) and the intransitive past tense marker (*-i*) in past forms (with third person argument; *ngà rōmnv̄ng-pè gō shì bóì* [1sg friend-MALE also die PFV-INTR.PAST] ‘My friend also died’); they can be used transitively only when they take valency-increasing morphological marking (causative, benefactive)<sup>3</sup>.
- Adjectives often take the nominaliser *wē* in citation (e.g. *tēwē* ‘big’), and when modifying a noun can follow the noun (*lègā tē bok* [book big CL] ‘the big book’), unlike verbs, but can also take the intransitive morphology, and when used as predicates function the same as other intransitive verbs (e.g. *ngà nō tē-ng wē ínìgō* [1sg TOP big-1sg NOM although] ‘Although I was older’) and so are considered a subclass of intransitive verb.
- Transitives take the non-past third person object marker (*ò*) plus the non-past affirmative/declarative particle (*ē*) in non-past forms (e.g. *sháòē* ‘to know (something)’, *riòē* ‘to carry (something)’, *yv̄ngóē* ‘to see (something)’; see (1), below, for a full example) and the transitive past tense marker (*-à*) in past forms (with third person P arguments; see (2) below); they can be used intransitively only when they take valency-reducing morphological marking (intransitivizing prefix, reflexive/middle marking suffix). In transitive clauses the agentive marking clitic (*-í*) generally appears on the noun phrase representing the A argument<sup>4</sup>. Rawang seems to have only two ditransitive roots: *ziòē* ‘give’ and *v̄lòē* ‘tell’, and they take the same morphology as mono-transitives. All other ditransitive verbs, such as *dvtānòē* ‘show’ (< *vtānē* ‘be clearly visible’), and *shvriòē* ‘send’ (< *riòē* ‘carry’), are all derived using the causative construction.

(1) Ngáí gō̄ tiq gó shángòē .  
 ngà-í            gō̄        [tiq gó]<sub>p</sub>    shá-ng-ò-ē  
 1sg-AGT        also    one    person know-1sg-TNP-NONPAST  
 ‘I also know one man (there).’ (Interview with Bezideu, 38:3)

(2) Rvshàrií yv̄ng bóà kvt, . . .  
 rvshà-rì-í        yv̄ng    bó-à                    kvt  
 monkey-pl-AGT    see      PFV-TR.PAST        when  
 ‘When the monkeys saw (him), . . .’ (Mykangya and the monkeys, 4:2)

- Ambitransitives (labile verbs) can be used as transitives or intransitives without morphological derivation (*á:mòē* / *v̄mē* ‘to eat’). There are both S=P type and S=A type ambitransitives<sup>5</sup>. With the S=P type, (e.g. *gvyaqē* ‘be broken, destroyed’ ~ *gvyaqòē* ‘break, destroy’), adding an A argument creates a causative, without the need to use the causative prefix. With the S=A type, as in (3), use of the intransitive vs. the transitive form marks a difference between a general or habitual situation and a particular situation respectively. If

the P is specific, then the transitive form must be used, but if the P is non-specific, it is not necessary to use the intransitive form. If no P is mentioned, then usually the intransitive form is used.<sup>6</sup>

- (3) a. Àng pe zvē tnē .  
 àng pē zvt-ē  
 3sg basket weave-NONPAST  
 ‘He weaves baskets.’ (general or habitual sense)
- b. À:ngí pē tiqch̀v̀ng za:tnòē .  
 àng-í [pē tiq-ch̀v̀ng]<sub>p</sub> zvt-ò-ē  
 3sg-AGT basket one-CL weave-TNP-NONPAST  
 ‘He is weaving a basket.’

The copula, *iē*, takes the intransitive morphology and is like other intransitive verbs in terms of person marking, tense/aspect marking, interrogative marking, applicative marking, and nominalization (see (4) below), but it has two arguments. The copula cannot take causative marking, the way most other intransitives can, though it can take the precative marker (*laq-*), which is a sub-type of imperative (e.g. *cílcè laq-(mò)-í* ‘(Don’t) let him be a soldier’). Two other verbs that take two arguments but are always formally intransitive are *mvyóē* ‘to want, to like’ and *vdáe* ‘to have, own’.

- (4) Ngà wā mò-óngà.  
 ngà wā mv-i-ng-à  
 1sg only NEG-be-1sg-TR.PAST  
 ‘(It) was not only me.’ (‘I was not alone.’) (Interview with Bezideu, 18:3)

### 3. Transitivity harmony in Rawang

A small subset of transitive verbs can be used following a main verb to mark the phase or other aspects of the action, such as *d̀v̀n* (*dá:nòē*) ‘be about to’, *p̀v̀ng* (*pà:ngòē*) ‘begin to’, *m̀v̀n* (*mā : nòē*) ‘continue’, *m̀v̀nòē* ‘be used to’, *d̀v̀ng* (*dá:ngòē*) ‘finish’. There is also at least one ambitransitive verb that can be used as an auxiliary as well, *daqē ~ daqòē* ‘be able to’. These verbs can all appear on their own as the main verb in a clause, but when they act as auxiliary to another verb, they have to match the transitivity of the main verb. For example, with a transitive main verb, the auxiliary simply follows that verb and the two verbs together take one set of transitive marking morphology, as in (5), where the auxiliary verb *m̀v̀n* (*mā : nòē*) ‘continue’ follows the transitive verb *dvkò̀mòē* ‘gather (something)’, and the transitive non-past marker *-ò* marks the combined predicate as transitive (this clause is in the imperative mood, and so the declarative particle *ē* is not used).

- (5) Paqzí sháò shvlē gō̄ wē dō̄ **dvkò̀m mā:nò!**  
 [paqzí shá-ò shvlē]<sub>p</sub> gō̄ wē -dō̄ [dvkò̀m<sup>7</sup> m̀v̀n-ò]<sub>PRED</sub>  
 education know-TNP layer also that-ADV gather continue-TNP  
 ‘Continue to gather the educated ones that way!’ (Karu Zong, 46.3)

If instead the main verb is intransitive (either originally intransitive or a derived intransitive), then the auxiliary verb must be intransitivised, as in (6), where the same auxiliary, *m̀v̀n* (*mā:nòē*) ‘continue’, is made intransitive by the reflexive/middle voice suffix *-shì* to harmonise with the intransitive verb *vløp* (*vløpmē*) ‘enter, go/sink into’. The reflexive/middle

voice suffix is most often used for the purpose of intransitivising in this grammatical context, even though there is no obvious reflexive or middle voice meaning.

- (6) Kād̄ wàò nìḡ, sòngmèd̄v̄m n̄-vl̄p **mv̄nshìē** wā.  
 k̄a-d̄ w̄a-ò nìḡ, [sòngmè-d̄v̄m]<sub>S</sub> n̄ [vl̄p **mv̄n-shì-ē**]<sub>PRED</sub> wā  
 WH-ADV do-TNP though needle-CL TOP go.into continue-R/M-NONPAST HS  
 ‘No matter how (he tried) the needle keep on going inside, it is said.’ (Makangya, 6.5)

In (7), the ambitransitive verb *daqē* ~ *daqòē* ‘be able to’ is used first as an intransitive, as it follows an intransitive verb (which is intransitivised by the reflexive/middle marker *-shì* because it is reflexive), and then is used in its transitive form, as it follows a transitive verb:

- (7) Yv̄nglòng n̄, wā shì **daqē**, wā; T̄lòng n̄ gw̄r **daqòē**, wā .  
 Yv̄ng-lòng n̄ [wā -shì **daqē**]<sub>PRED</sub> wā t̄-lòng n̄ [gw̄r **daq-ò-ē**]<sub>PRED</sub> wā  
 long-CL TOP do-R/M able-NONPAST HS short-CL TOP toss able-TNP-NONPAST HS  
 ‘Long ones can be taken for oneself; short ones can be discarded.’ (Rawang proverbs, #8)

Notice we are talking here purely about morphological transitivity; as with the ambitransitive verbs, there may be two arguments in the clause, but the clause is morphologically intransitive. A noun phrase representing an actor could be added to the first clause in (7), but it would not take the agentive marker (if a noun phrase representing an actor were added to the second clause, it would take the agentive marker).

In (8) we can see that when the main verb is intransitivised by the other intransitive marker (*v-*), which is used here to give the sense of a reciprocal, *daqē* also has to be intransitive:

- (8) Àngní dvh̄ n̄ dvku màkū í vrú ke n̄ vshvt daq ē], wā .  
 Àngní dvh̄ n̄ dvkū màkū -í v-rú kē n̄ [v-shvt **daq-ē**]<sub>PRED</sub> wā  
 3dl in.laws TOP ladle scoop-INST INTR-hit RECIP PS INTR-fight can-NONPAST HS  
 ‘Close relatives sometimes can fight.’ (Rawang proverbs #7)

The auxiliaries follow the harmony pattern even with the different forms of the ambitransitive verbs, that is, when the ambitransitive main verb is used as an intransitive verb, the auxiliary verb will also be intransitive, but if the ambitransitive main verb is used as a transitive verb, then the auxiliary will be transitive. Compare (9a-b), for example:

- (9) a àng v̄m̄dv̄ngshì b̄h̄  
 àng [v̄m̄-**dv̄ng-shì** b̄h̄-ì]<sub>PRED</sub>  
 3sg eat-finish-R/M PFV-INTR.PAST  
 ‘He finished eating.’ (intransitive *v̄mē* ‘eat’)
- b à:ngí v̄mpàlòng v̄m̄dv̄ng b̄h̄à  
 àng-í v̄mpà-lòng [v̄m̄-**dv̄ng** b̄h̄-à]<sub>PRED</sub>  
 3sg-AGT food-CL eat-finish PFV-TR.PAST  
 ‘He has finished eating the food.’ (transitive *v̄mòē* ‘eat’)

The pattern is also followed when the main verb is nominalised, as in (10), where *ngaqòē* ‘push over’ is intransitivised by the intransitivising prefix, and then nominalised by the purposive suffix (see LaPolla 2000 on the prefix, and LaPolla 2008 on the suffix and complement structures). Because the verb is intransitive, the auxiliary must be intransitivised.

- (10) Vngaq́lvm                      dv́nshìē.  
 v-nqaq-lvm                      dv́n-shì-ē.  
 INTR-push-PUR                about.to-R/M-NONPAST  
 ‘(It) seems like (it) is about to fall down.’

#### 4. Transitivity harmony in other languages

There are several other languages around the world that show transitivity harmony. One language that patterns very much like Rawang is Shipibo-Konibo (Valenzuela 2009). There are two patterns that exhibit transitivity harmony in Shipibo-Konibo. One of these patterns involves forms derived from verbs having deictive-direction meanings that are clearly grammaticalising into suffixes, and form tight serial verb structures with other verbs in which they occur, with or without middle marking depending on whether the verb they occur with is intransitive or transitive, respectively. The other pattern is with phasal verbs, as in Rawang. These verbs, *peo-* ‘begin’, *keyo-* ‘finish’, and *jene-* ‘stop, leave’, are all full transitive verbs, and can be used alone or as auxiliary verbs. When used as auxiliary verbs, they must match the main verb in transitivity, and so when the main verb is intransitive, they will take the middle voice marker *-t* to become intransitive verbs. Compare (11a), intransitive, and (11b) transitive (note the difference in absolutive vs. ergative marking on the actor), both with the auxiliary *peo-* ‘to begin’, but with the auxiliary intransitivised in (11a) by the middle voice marking (both from Valenzuela 2009:18, exx. (29)-(30)). This pattern is amazingly similar to that of Rawang except that in Shipibo-Konibo there is same-subject marking on the main verb, which also reflects the transitivity of the clause.

- (11) a E-a-ra                ransa-i                      peokoo-ke.  
 1-ABS-EV                dance-SIM.SS.S                begin:MID-CMPL  
 ‘I began to dance (e.g. at a party).’
- b E-n-ra                (xeki)                      bana-kin                peo-ke.  
 1-ERG-EV                (corn:ABS)                sow-SIM.SS.A                begin-CMPL  
 ‘I began to sow (it/the corn).’

In the Austronesian language Saliba (Margetts 1999:102-105;118) we find a similar phenomenon of transitivity harmony, though in this case the valency is increased, in two different ways. In certain serial verb structures, if  $V_1$  is transitive, and  $V_2$  is intransitive,  $V_2$  must be causativised to make it transitive so that the two verbs have the same subject, as in example (12) (Margetts 1999: 118):

- (12) ye-kabi-he-keno-Ø  
 3sg-touch/make-CAUS-lie/sleep-3sg.O  
 ‘he threw him down’

In certain other serial constructions there is also transitivity harmony, but it is achieved using the applicative marker, as in (13), where the stem *namwa* ‘good, properly’ takes the applicative suffix to match the transitivity of the main verb (Margetts 2005:75):

- (13) ye-hekata-namwa-namwa-i-gai  
 3sg-CAUS-learn-REDUP-good-APPL-1EXCL.O  
 ‘She teaches us properly.’

A similar phenomenon is also found in some Australian languages, such as Kaytety (Harold Koch, personal communication, July 2008) and Wambaya (Nordlinger 1999), though in the examples I know of an intransitive auxiliary is causativised to match a transitive main verb (Kaytety), or the two verbs in certain tight serial verb constructions have to match in transitivity, such that you would say ‘hit + kill’ rather than ‘hit + die’ (Wambaya), much as the first of the two constructions discussed above in Saliba.

## 5. Discussion

My main point in writing this paper is to establish transitivity harmony as a typological phenomenon. As for the motivation and historical development of this phenomenon, each language may have its own motivations and path of development.

Valenzuela argues that the Shipibo-Konibo constructions ‘suggest an ongoing diachronic change, whereby certain phasal chained constructions are developing into serialized monclausal ones’ (2009:24). This could also be the case in Rawang.

Margetts (1999:102-105) argues that transitivity harmony of the type in (12) in Saliba is driven by the same-subject constraint on serial verb constructions, and only the causative marker (which adds an A) and not the applicative marker (which adds a P) can be used for this function in that construction. In Rawang that explanation does not hold, as for S=A ambitransitives there would then be no motivation for using the intransitive vs. the transitive form, as the same referent is S and A. In the Saliba serial construction where the applicative suffix is used, as in (13), the two stems must match in transitivity as they share a single grammatical object suffix. This again cannot be the explanation in Rawang, as the resulting form in Rawang is morphologically intransitive.

Much like an antipassive construction, the reflexive/middle marker causes the A of the transitive clause to become the S of an intransitive clause, generally when there is less differentiation of the A from the P, as in reflexives and middles (see Kemmer 1993, LaPolla 2004). In the case of transitivity harmony, intransitivising the auxiliary in this way would be necessary when there is a less-differentiated or non-salient P, or when there is no P at all, as the transitive morphology would imply a specific, differentiated P, and thereby confuse the listener if no such P existed.

I think the explanation for why only the reflexive/middle voice marker is used to intransitivise the verb, and not the unmarked intransitiviser (the prefix *v-*, seen in (10)) is on the one hand that the reflexive/middle marker allows a second noun phrase to appear in the clause, whereas the intransitivising prefix does not, and on the other hand that intransitives marked with the reflexive/middle marker as opposed to the intransitivising prefix imply that the action was volitional. For example, the word *tv̄l (tá:lòē)* ‘to roll (something)’ with the intransitivising prefix becomes *vtv̄lē* ‘(of something) to roll (unintentionally)’, whereas with the reflexive/middle suffix, it becomes *tv̄lsh̄iē* ‘to roll oneself (i.e. intentionally)’. So in the case of the auxiliary verbs meaning ‘start’, ‘continue’, ‘finish’, etc., the reflexive/middle suffix may be used because of this sense of volitionality.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Rawang writing system (Morse 1962, 1963), which is used in this paper, most letters represent the standard pronunciations of English, except that *i* = [i], *v* = [ə], *a* = [ɑ], *o* = [o], *q* = [q], and *c* = [s] or [ts] (free variation; historically [ts]). Tones are marked as follows (using the letter *a* as a base): high falling tone: *á*, mid tone: *ā*, low falling tone: *à*. All syllables that end in a stop consonant (*-p*, *-t*, *-q*, *-k*) are in the high tone. Open syllables without a tone mark are unstressed. A colon marks non-basic long vowels. Four lines are used in the examples because of the many morphophonological changes that obscure the morpheme boundaries.

<sup>3</sup> Some stative intransitive verbs can take an oblique argument marked by the locative/dative marker *sv̀ng*, e.g. *svrē* ‘to be afraid’, where the stimulus is marked as an oblique argument, and the verb remains intransitive:

- (i)        ngà vgi □ sv̀ng svrē ngē  
             ngà        vgi □-sv̀ng svrē -ng-ē  
             1sg        dog-LOC afraid-1sg-NONPAST  
             ‘I’m afraid of dogs.’

<sup>4</sup> Morse (1965:348) analysed the appearance of the verbal suffix *-o* as a necessary criterion for a clause to be transitive, and so argued that only clauses with third person P arguments were transitive. I have chosen to analyse this suffix as marking a third person P argument (from a comparison with other dialects, it seems this form comes from the third person form of the verb ‘to do’), and consider clauses that do not have third person P arguments as transitive if the NP representing the A argument can take the agentive marker.

<sup>5</sup> These refer to whether the single argument of the intransitive use of the verb corresponds to the A(ctor) argument or the P(atient) argument of the transitive use.

<sup>6</sup> Often there are still two noun phrases in the clause, even in the intransitive version, so what we are talking about is morphological transitivity, as defined above, and also what Van Valin & LaPolla (1997, §4.2) refer to as ‘M-transitivity’, transitivity defined using the number of macro-roles. In the case of examples like (3a), there would only be one macro-role, the Actor, as the *Actionsart* of the clause is activity. The second noun phrase does not represent an Undergoer.

<sup>7</sup> There is a tone change from low to high tone on this verb when the auxiliary is added. This change occurs with some words, but not with all. It may be a type of stem formation, or a type of nominalization, as it appears when the reflexive/middle voice suffix or the benefactive suffix is added as well.

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## Appendix 1: Abbreviations

1EXCL.O	1st person exclusive object	MID	middle voice marker
A	actor of a transitive clause	NOM	nominaliser
ABS	absolutive marker	NONPAS	non-past marker
		T	
ADV	adverbial marker	P	patient of a transitive clause
AGT	agentive marker	PUR	purposive nominaliser
APPL	applicative	PFV	perfective marker
CAUS	causative	pl	plural marker
CL	classifier	RECIP	reciprocal marker
CMPL	completive aspect	REDUP	reduplication
ERG	ergative marker	R/M	reflexive/middle marker
EV	direct evidential	S	single direct argument of an intransitive verb
		SIM.SS.	simultaneous event, same subject, A-oriented
HS	hearsay marker	SIM.SS.S	simultaneous event, same subject, S-oriented
		TNP	3rd person transitive non-past marker
INST	instrumentive marker	TOP	topic marker
		TR.PAST	transitive past marker
INTR	intransitivising prefix		
INTR.PA	3rd person intransitive past marker		
ST			
LOC	locative marker		
MALE	male gender marker		